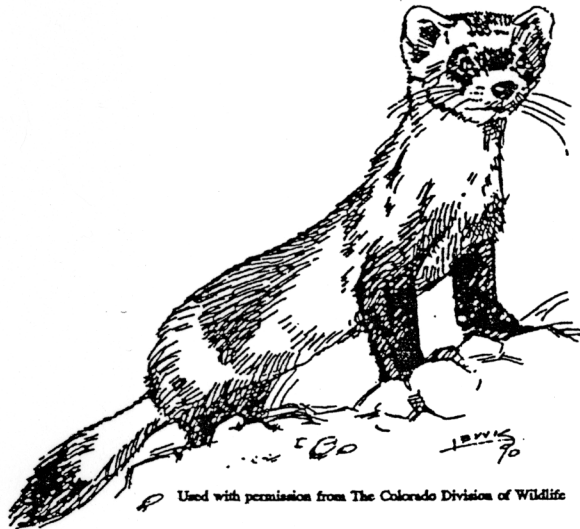


# BLACK-FOOTED FERRET

*Mustela nigripes*



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## Official Status: Endangered

Endangered species are species that are in danger of extinction throughout all or a significant portion of their range. It is unlawful to kill, harm, or harass endangered species.

**Listed:** 35 Federal Register 8495; June 2, 1970.

**Historical Status:** Black-footed ferrets once ranged throughout the Great Plains. It has been calculated that, if all suitable habitat had been used, as many as 5.6 million black-footed ferrets may have existed in the late 1800's. Populations declined dramatically in the 1900's. A population was located in Mellette County, South Dakota, from 1964-1979. However, the last confirmed sighting in South Dakota was in Todd County in 1979. The last known population was found at Meetze, Wyoming, in 1981. The remaining 18 individuals from this population were captured and put into a captive breeding facility in 1987.

**Present Status:** From 1987 until 1991, the black-footed ferret may have been extirpated in the wild. In the fall of 1992, 91 captive animals were reintroduced into the wild in Wyoming. The reintroduced animals were designated an "experimental" population. Unconfirmed sightings from other areas continue to be reported. In South Dakota, the majority of the reports come from the southwest part of the state. There are still about 300 black-footed ferrets in captivity. South Dakota is being evaluated for reintroduction sites.

**Habitat:** The black-footed ferret inhabits shortgrass prairies, always within close proximity to prairie dog towns.

**Life History:** Black-footed ferrets can breed when one year old. Breeding takes place from March to May. Gestation ranges from 41 to 45 days. Typically, there are three to four young per litter. Young black-footed ferrets leave the family group around September. Juvenile males suffer high mortality, a result of their dispersing to new areas. Life expectancies for wild black-footed ferrets are probably less than five years. Prairie dogs comprise 90 percent of the diet of black-footed ferrets. A black-footed ferret family of 4 will consume an

average 763 prairie dogs per year. Black-footed ferrets utilize prairie dog burrows for shelter and raising families. Black-footed ferrets are primarily nocturnal. They are active in the winter.

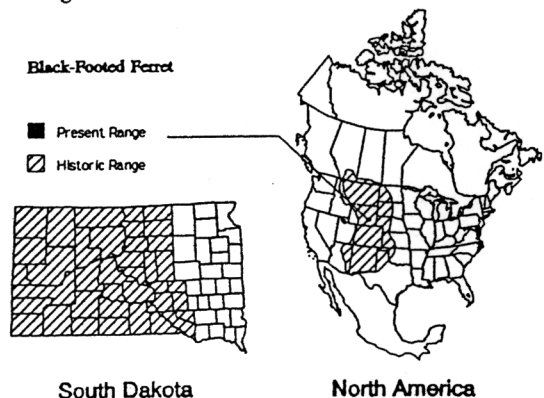
**Aid To Identification:** Black-footed ferrets are 20" to 24" long, including a 6" tail, and weigh up to 2½ pounds. They have a yellowish, brown body with a distinctive black mask across the face and have black on the feet and the tip of the tail. The related long-tailed weasel is about half the size of the black-footed ferret and does not have the distinctive black markings.

**Reasons For Decline:** The rapid decline of black-footed ferrets has been linked to the eradication of prairie dogs. Prairie dogs now occupy less than two percent of their historic range. Threats to black-footed ferrets also include canine distemper. Black-footed ferrets are susceptible to predation by golden eagles, great-horned owls, badgers, and coyotes. They are also susceptible to road kills and trapping.

**Recommendations:** Protect remaining prairie dog communities. It is recommended that individuals contact the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service before initiating activities that affect prairie dog towns. Report any suspected black-footed ferret sightings to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, (605) 224-8693, or the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, (605) 773-4345.

**Comments:** Prairie dogs are essential to black-footed ferrets. Prairie dog towns also provide habitat for other rare species, such as mountain plovers, burrowing owls, ferruginous hawks, prairie falcons, and swift fox, and game species like pronghorns.

**References:** *Black-Footed Ferret Recovery Plan* by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, 1988. *Handbook of Methods for Locating Black-footed Ferrets*, 1984, and *Black-Footed Ferret Habitat: Some Management and Reintroduction Considerations*, 1985, both published by the Wyoming Game and Fish Commission and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management.



Present and historic distribution of the black-footed ferret.

• 1993 U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Pierre, South Dakota